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ABSTRACT

Representing a work in progress, this paper presents the theoretical framework for a longitudinal case study involving the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in an ethnically diverse urban middle school. The effects that cooperative learning has on the curriculum as perceived by teachers are also to be examined during the 3-year span (1992-1995) of this study. Cooperative learning is defined as curriculum process, and the implementation of cooperative learning strategies as curriculum enactment. Qualitative methodology is used that relies heavily on interviewing, content analysis, and participant observation. The perceptions of teachers are crucial to uncovering answers to the three questions that guide the research, namely: To what degree have cooperative learning strategies been used? What impact have they had on the planned curriculum? and What are the factors that facilitate or inhibit the enactment of cooperative learning strategies in the classroom? (Contains 30 references.) (SLD)

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Implementing Cooperative Learning Strategies: A Conceptual Framework For Curriculum Enactment in an Urban Middle School

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Introduction

This paper represents the theoretical framework of a longitudinal case study involving the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in an ethnically diverse urban middle school. By way of introduction, the following background story is provided. My first exposure to the use of cooperative learning as an instructional strategy occurred in 1990, in an inner city elementary school. I was observing the classroom of a teacher well known to expertly employ the instructional strategies of hands on mathematics and cooperative learning. Fascinated, I witnessed the class working in heterogenous teams to solve complex problems involving area and volume. At liberty to circulate among the teams, I asked such questions as what are you doing? What roles do each of you have? How are you coming up with the answers? What happens next? In my most professorial manner, I knelt beside one little boy and asked him why he thought his teacher was having him work in a group. His brown eyes met mine and he stated, very matter-of-factly, "because my teacher's really into this team shit." Needless to say, I think that children understand far more about the curriculum than we give them credit. His remark struck a cord and that is how I became interested in the question of how the use of cooperative learning changes the curriculum.

Not long after this incident, I was invited to become part of a cooperative learning alliance in an inner city middle school. The endeavor can best be described as a grass roots effort of six middle school teachers involved in trying to change the instruction of a school to include cooperative learning techniques. Although the teachers have the support of the principal, this was fundamentally a teacher led implementation effort which had a dual impetus: (1) teachers were concerned that students lacked the basic social skills necessary for operating in society; (2) teachers believed that cooperative learning strategies could potentially engage the at-risk student, thereby being a particularly relevant strategy for the urban preadolescent.

This core of teachers is currently providing hands-on in services on cooperative learning to their peers. They seek, by the slow diffusion of introducing teachers of the school to cooperative learning techniques, to change the instructional culture. It can be unequivocally stated that this is a teacher led implementation effort.

This paper provides the methodology for a longitudinal case study involving the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in an ethnically diverse urban middle school and the subsequent effect the adoption has on the curriculum of the school. Cooperative learning will be examined in its relationship to the curriculum and the theoretical framework presented will be guided by current research on curriculum theory

and curriculum implementation or enactment. Representing a work-in-progress, this paper is in keeping with Decker Walker's (1993) suggestion that curriculum theorists "should probably write less, study more, and circulate our papers and discuss them in the spirit of making our work more defensible and more widely useful" (115).

Research Methodology

The case study will examine longitudinally the introduction of cooperative learning strategies into an ethnically diverse urban middle school and the subsequent effects that cooperative learning has on the curriculum of the school as perceived by the teachers. In a review of research on what is known about "what schools really teach," Gehrke et al. (1992) determined that in examining what the curriculum "appears to be" it is necessary to distinguish between the planned curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the experienced curriculum. The planned curriculum is the curriculum as set forth in district guides, textbooks, teachers' planning notes, as well as other documents. The enacted curriculum is that which is occurring within the classroom and the experienced curriculum can be defined as the teachers' perception of the learning received within the classroom (Gehrke et al, 1992). The proposed research questions will be initially answered in light of the initial core group of teachers who are currently enacting cooperative learning

techniques within their classrooms. The research will be guided by the following three questions:

(1) What are the teachers' perceptions of the degree to which cooperative learning strategies have been enacted within their classrooms?;

(2) What are the teachers' perceptions of the impact that cooperative learning strategies have had on the planned curriculum?;

(3) What are the teachers' perceptions of the factors that facilitate or inhibit the enactment of cooperative learning strategies within the classroom?

The research questions will be examined utilizing a case study methodology. The case study methodology allows the researcher to gain an indepth understanding of the phenomenon in question and is a particularly effective methodology for examining questions related to the curriculum (Merriam, 1988; Shaw, 1978). Examining cooperative learning from the perspective of curriculum implementation or enactment "demands the understanding and acceptance of the subjective realities of the players undergoing the change process" (Snyder et al., 1993, 418). A qualitative analysis provides the most facilitative means of understanding teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning as curriculum process and enactment. Data will be collected and triangulated by employing such strategies as content analysis of curriculum planning documents and lesson

plans, teacher interviews, and participant observation (Merriam, 1988, Yin, 1984). A semi-stuctured interview schedule contains descriptive, structural and contrast questions. The participant observation conducted in the school consists of a combination of descriptive, focused, and selective observation. As Janesick (1991) explains, "Descriptive observation...includes observation in the social setting in which the researcher describes as much of the behavior as possible...the researcher responds to the general question, "What is going on here?" (104). The researcher concentrates on a particular part of the "say, setting, or social interaction and describes in detail exactly what is going onwith the particular people in the study, in their own milieu" (104). Focused observation is directed at, among other aspects, teacher inservices, relationships between teachers and students, as well between teacher and teacher. "Selected observations...pinpoint exactly what needs to be documented regarding some component of the social setting" (104). The cooperative learning strategies employed by the core group of teachers (members of the Cooperative Learning Alliance) in the classroom and the instances of behavior which support or disconfirm the teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning and its subsequent effect upón the curriculum is the focus of selected observation.

As cited by Walker (1993), Spindler (1982, 6-7) offers the following standards for those involved in qualitative study:

*Observations are contextualized.
*Questions for study emerge as the study proceeds.

*Observation is prolonged and repetitive.
*The native's view of reality is brougt out.
*Effort is made to understand the participants' sociocultural knowledge.
*Instruments are generated in the field.
*A transcultural perspective is present.
*Tacit knowledge is brought to light.
*Inquiry disturbs the setting as little as possible.
*The ethnographer must elicit informant's knowledge in a natural form (105).

By employing Spindler's (1982) standards, a qualitative case study should yield rich and extensive data. As Walker (1993) concludes in his defense of qualitative techniques in curriculum research:

> Curriculum work is not, in general, a favorable environment for controlled laboratory experimentation...The point is obvious. Curriculum research is shaped by the environment in which it must function (110).

Theoretical Framework

Three objectives guide the paper and serve as the theoretical framework:

(1) to explore the fit between the school needs of preadolescents and cooperative learning strategies.

(2) to probe the intersection of curriculum and pedagogy;

(3) to observe the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in light of current research on curriculum implementation or curriculum enactment;

School needs of preadolescents

Recent reform proposals concerning middle school education

and early adolescence point to the confusion and oftentimes threatening environment of middle school youth and call for the necessity of curriculum changes to engage the young learner. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Hechinger, 1992). Educational engagement refers to "the psychological investment required to comprehend and master knowledge and skills...It is the result of interaction between students, teachers and curriculum (Wehlage et al. 1989, 177). Leming (1992) refers to the "propensity for risk taking behavior among youth" (113). Such risks are "compounded for those who are poor, members of racial or ethnic minorities or recent immigrants" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, 25). The problem is exacerbated when there exists, as this report suggests:

> "a volatile mismatch...between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents. Caught in a vortex of changing demands, the engagement of many youth in learning diminishes, and their rates of alienation, substance abuse, absenteeism, and dropping out of school begin to rise.(Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, 8-9).

Engaging the early adolescent has become a matter of high priority due to a variety of factors as proposed by Wiles and Bondi (1993).

> *The middle grades years represent the last chance for students to master basic skills
> *The middle grades represent the last time for formal schooling for many of our youth. Low achievers drop out after the middle grades.
> *The final attitude toward self and others, as well as a lasting attitude toward learning is established in the middle grades.

*Future school success, indeed future life success, can be predicted for most students in the middle grades. (302).

Wiles and Bondi (1993) suggest that the middle school accommodate the needs of the early adolescent population by employing a school program that attempts to tie formal learning directly to the developmental needs of the students who are served. This involves a shift of roles from teacher as parent, as seen in the elementary school, to teacher as advisor or facilitator. The role of the teacher in the context of a classroom involved in cooperative learning strategies is one in which he/she authors the task and sets the stage for student learning. The students in essence become responsible for their own learning and thus help shape the curriculum of the classroom.

As students work cooperatively on tasks, they become involved in an exploratory process. Current middle school curriculum researchers recommend that the middle school curriculum move away from what has been called an elementary school skills orientation to one that involves exploration (George, 1993; Wiles & Bondi, 1993). Such a suggestion is in keeping with what researchers have found to be the needs of the early adolescent. For example, Dorman, Lipsitz, and Verner (1985), as cited by George and Alexander (1993), identify the following as needs of the early adolescents as a school group:

*diversity (in experiencing teaching, curriculum, and scheduling);
*self-exploration and self-definition;
*meaningful participation in school and community;
*positive social interaction with peers and adults;
*physical activity;
*competence and achievement; and

*structure and clear limits. (4)

Cooperative learning techniques match Dorman, Lipsitz and Verner's (1993) conception of the school needs of early adolescents by providing structure, diversity of instructional experiences, group participation and responsibility, and by affording students feelings of personal and interpersonal competence (Slavin, 1991). McEwin (1983) asserts that appropriate social experiences should become an essential component of effective middle level schools. His argument is based on the belief that "early adolescents are at various stages of social development" (McEwin, 1983, 123) and recommends that activities be incorporated into the school curriculum "which promote the acquisition of social skills and minimize elitism" (123). In keeping with McEwin's (1983) emphasis on appropriate social experiences for middle school youth, Hass and Parkay (1993) state that the objectives of educational programs for early adolescents be socially derived. They state that it is imperative that middle school goals include:

> **Helping the learners to learn to deal with wider social experiences and new social arrangements.**
> a. Provide experiences with a more varied group of peers
> b. Provide experiences with new learning arrangements.
> c. Provide opportunity for the early adolescent peer culture to develop its supportive functions for its members.
> d. Develop a concern for the environment, the community, the society, the future and the welfare of others.
> **Providing an atmosphere adjusted to the developmental level of learners.**
> a. Study each learner carefully and modify crude classifications based on age and grade.
> b. Provide where a psychologically mixed group can develop in a framework not dominated by any one subgroup.
> **Helping the learners to deal with value questions that arise**

> because of their developing cognitive competence, their growing need for independence, and rapid changes in society. (405).

Such program objectives serve as a rationale for why the implementation of cooperative learning strategies provides an excellent instructional methodology for the middle school environment, particularly for the urban youngster. Jeannie Oakes (1987) recommends that urban schools take a broad view of curriculum and instruction and that classroom teaching promote positive self-perceptions, as well as engage all urban youngsters in learning that builds on cooperation.

Cooperative learning techniques have been found to be an effective educational engagement mechanism for at-risk populations (Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Salend & Sonnenschein, 1989; Slavin, 1984). Identified as instructional strategies which consistently achieve both cognitive and affective objectives (Leming, 1992), cooperative learning can be briefly defined as an instructional technique "which employ(s) small teams of pupils to promote peer interaction and cooperation for studying academic subjects" (Sharan, 1980, 242). Research has shown that cooperative learning has improved cross-racial friendships (Leming, 1992) and improves student self-esteem and self-concept (Slavin, 1991). As George et al. (1992) summarize:

> If we want students to be able to function in a cooperative society-indeed, a cooperative world-when they reach adulthood, we need to teach them the skills they will need to do so. Most young adolescents want to be part of a group, so cooperative learning seems to

> be a natural and promising strategy for helping them learn...Cooperative grouping techniques foster an atmosphere of interdependence in which members grow to value helping and teamwork in order to achieve group goals. Students further recognize, and learn to appreciate, differences among themselves when they are cooperatively grouped. Such realizations foster understanding and subsequent respect for individual differences in aptitudes, talents, and approaches to tasks-an understanding that is certainly useful in the workplace (73)

Such postitive outcomes, in turn serve to shape the ongoing curriculum process, a theme which will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The problematic nature of curriculum research has long been identified by curriculum experts (Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Schubert, 1986) and can be directly attributed to the lack of definitional consensus that exists in the field (Doyle, 1993; Gehrke et al., 1992).

> The term "curriculum" has multiple definitions or images, no one of which completely captures the scope of meaning associated with its use...curriculum refers in a broad sense to the substance or content of schooling, that is, to the knowledges, methodologies, and dispositions that constitute the experiences and the outcomes of schooling (487).

Doyle (1993) asserts that such problems in defining the term occur due to curriculum discourse operating at two levels, namely the institutional and the experiential. He defines the formal or institutional curriculum as "the core substance of schooling" and the experiential as that which "is taught and learned in schools"

For the purposes of this research, curriculum will be

defined according to Cornbleth's (1990) definition of curriculum as "contextualized social process." which "emphasizes the continuing construction and reconstruction of curriculum in classroom practice" (Cornbleth, 1990, 13). Such a conception of curriculum opposes the technocratic notion of curriculum "as a tangible product" and views the structural and sociocultural contexts of curriculum as multifaceted and variable (Cornbleth, 1990). Given such a definition, curriculum can be seen to incorporate the interaction of teachers, students and school milieu.

Cornbleth'S (1990) definition is supported by other scholars in the field who have viewed curriculum as "place" (Pinar and Kincheloe, 1991), as "events" (Posner, 1988), and as "evolving construction" based on the interaction and interplay between teacher and students (Zumwalt, 1989). Cornbleth's (1990) definition of curriculum is particularly applicable to the examination of the impact of cooperative learning on the school curriculum in that, by definition, it recognizes that students continually construct and reconstruct their own learning within the classroom and that school structure cannot be conceived of as a single entity, but rather "comprises a network of interconnected strands" which can be "characterized by varying degrees of stability and discontinuity, or tension and contradiction" (Cornbleth, 1990, p. 101). It can be hypothesized that the structural changes wrought by the employment of cooperative learning strategies in the school classroom will have

a profound impact upon the curriculum, both implicit and explicit. Curriculum defined as "contextualized social process" (Cornbleth, 1990) implies that the implementation of cooperative learning strategies involves the intersection of curriculum and pedagogy, a domain Doyle (1992) has called "fuzzy" but interrelated. Traditionally, curriculum has referred to the substance or the "what" of what is being taught. Pedagogy has been related to the instruction of the school and refers to the processes or the "how" of schooling, taking into consideration "the human interactions that occur during actual teaching episodes" (486). In examining the question "what schools really teach" Gehrke, Knapp, and Sirotnik (1992) conclude that:

> The act of teaching shapes what is taught, and what is to be taught shapes how it is taught...separations between "curriculum" and "instruction" are useful in curriculum inquiry and instructional design theory, and certainly there are large bodies of work in both domains. But from the standpoint of making inferences ignoring instruction is about as fruitful as ignoring knowing when considering the nature of knowledge (Dewey, 1916). We cannot consider one in absence of the other (52).

Such an integrated conception of curriculum and pedagogy suggests that cooperative learning can be understood as curriculum process. Classrooms form the contexts in which students encounter the curriculum events upon which they must act with respect to content. Teachers create tasks that students are to accomplish, thereby "authoring" curriculum Students contribute to the authoring of curriculum events as they participate in these enactments. "The authoring of curriculum events is, therefore, a dynamic process in which content is

produced and transformed continuously (Doyle, 1992, 508). Cooperative learning as curriculum process, in essence would move beyond the notion of teaching as an interpersonal exchange between teacher and student into one which involves student to student and student to teacher interpersonal exchange. The instructional strategies superimposed upon the curriculum provides the context in which the curriculum is "authored." Doyle (1992) concludes by stating that the intersection of curriculum and pedagogy must be grounded in the events that teachers and students jointly construct in classroom settings. and maintains that much can be learned by trying to understand classroom events as they are "authored" by students and teachers. Such an examination would be grounded in the examination of how curriculum is enacted and experienced by teachers as opposed to how a proposed prepackaged curriculum is implemented or adapted by teachers (Snyder et al., 1993)

Curriculum Implementation or Enactment

This grounding represents how curriculum implementation is presently being considered by researchers in the field (Snyder et al., 1993). According to the authors (Snyder et al., 1993), the study of how a proposed curriculum is put into action (involving such aspects as role of the teacher, content, instructional strategies and classroom management) is currently undergoing change. "Underlying assumptions about the nature of curriculum

knowledge...are being questioned" (Snyder et al., 1993, 402). Moving away from traditional perspectives of curriculum implementation, Snyder et al. (1993) identify what they call "an evolving approach to curriculum implementation" which they identify as "curriculum enactment" (402), whereby curriculum is viewed as the educational experiences jointly created by student and teacher" (418). School roles changes under such a conception.

> The role of the teacher, then is as a curriculum developer who together with his or her students, grows ever more competent in constructing positive educational experiences. The process of the enacted curriculum is one of continual growth for both teachers and students. If the mind is a fire to be kindled, the role of the external curriculum expert is a teacher of teachers-one who kindles the fire of teachers who then join their fire with those of their students, thus continually adding to the flame (418).

An enactment perspective conceives of curriculum knowledge not as a product or event but as an ongoing process. "Context-specific curricular knowledge is acquired through deliberative practice. While teachers may use externally designed curriculum...it is they and their students who create the enacted curriculum..." (Snyder et al., 1993, 427).

Acknowledging a curriculum enactment perspective Bussis, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976) in a study of open education, as cited in Synder et al. (1993) stated that curriculum implementation, or what the authors termed "educational variation" exists at the level of the teacher, as opposed to generic curriculum packages or instructional materials. Teachers

and students in the classroom jointly decide upon "the nature and course of learning" (422). Such a conception alters the purpose of research on curriculum implementation or enactment from a prescriptive orientation of what works when implementing an innovation to one which seeks to understand the change which occurs in teacher thinking. As Sndyder et al. (1993) explain:

> From the enactment perspective, curriculum change is a process of growth for teachers and students-a change in thinking and practice-rather than an organized procedure for design and implementation of a new curriculum. It involves "genuine reconstruction": thinking, feeling, and assumptions must change, not just content and materials (Snyder et al., 1993, 429).

The implementation of cooperative learning strategies can be examined from the perspective of curriculum enactment, whereby the teacher is essential to the process. "It is the teachers' and students' interpretation of what is happening in the classroom and (the) changes in their ways of thinking and believing" (429) that provide the key to examining curriculum enactment.

Conclusion

This study attempts to define cooperative learning as curriculum process and the implementation of cooperative learning strategies as curriculum enactment. A work in progress, this paper reveals the theoretical framewok which supports the research. Due to the ongoing nature of curriculum process, the study is by necessity longitudinal, covering a three year period (1992-1995) of time to cover the initial enactment of the

curriculum innovation. The study employs a qualitative methodology which relies heavily on interviewing, content analysis, and participant observation. The perceptions of teachers are crucial to uncovering the following: (1) the degree to which cooperative learning strategies have been employed within their classrooms; (2) the impact that cooperative learning strategies have had on the planned curriculum; and (3) the factors that facilitate or inhibit the enactment of cooperative learning strategies in the classroom.

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